

Chapter 7

EXPANSION AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

1840–1854



Focus Questions

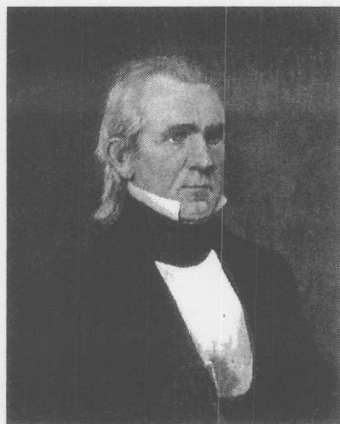
- ★ How did the ideas of Manifest Destiny emerge from nationalistic beliefs about America's past and its future?
- ★ How did the Texas-Mexican conflict of the 1830s encourage America's drive westward to the Pacific Ocean?
- ★ How did the Mexican War promote sectional division rather than national unity?
- ★ How was the Compromise of 1850 more a triumph of sectional self-interest than a true national compromise?
- ★ How did the Kansas-Nebraska Act realign the American political system?

Summary

In the early 1840s, America increasingly viewed territorial expansion as a means to restore its confidence and prosperity lost during the Panic of 1837. The editor John L. O'Sullivan added a divine quality to this quest when he wrote America should expand "by the right of our manifest destiny to overspread . . . [the] continent. . . ." Expansionist ideas also reflected America's successful experiment with democracy, as leaders called on the nation to expand "the area of liberty" to include lands controlled by Mexico and by Native Americans. In addition, for slaveholding southerners and their allies, expansion meant more land for slavery and increased influence in Congress. ¶

Texas War for Independence

The focus of expansion became Texas and its surrounding territories. Newly independent Mexico (1821) had a massive, undeveloped empire that included the Texas territory. Hoping to improve its economy and to create a buffer against the United States, Mexico opened Texas to immigration. Thousands of Americans, led by **Stephen Austin**, flocked to Texas to accept Mexican land grants. Agreeing to become Mexican citizens and to abide by Mexican law, over 30,000 Americans occupied Texas by 1835. These new immigrants failed to live up to their bargain, however, as they began to "Americanize" Texas. General **Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna** tried to subdue the rebellious Texans. After the massacre of Texans at the **Alamo** and the **Battle of San Jacinto**, **Sam Houston** and his fellow rebels achieved independence from Mexico in 1836 and formed the Lone Star Republic. Meanwhile, the Texans also sought annexation by the United States. Fearing war with Mexico (which still claimed Texas), dealing



James K. Polk

with the Panic of 1837, and divided over the addition of new slave territory, Congress repeatedly rejected Texas-statehood bids from 1836 to 1845.

In early 1845, lame-duck President John Tyler convinced Congress to pass a joint resolution that admitted the Lone Star Republic to the Union. Texas, although now officially a state, still presented problems. The new president, **James K. Polk**, wanted Mexican agreement to Texas annexation and to the Rio Grande as the border between the United States and Mexico. He also hoped to buy California for land-hungry America.

The Oregon Question

As the controversy between Mexico and the United States heated up, Polk confronted a dispute with Great Britain over the Oregon country. The two nations had jointly occupied the region since 1818. In the 1840s, thousands of Americans got "Oregon fever" and settled in the region. Increasingly, American leaders called for sole ownership of the region, with the northern boundary at 54 degrees, 40 minutes latitude. Polk threatened war if the British refused America's demands. Although the British would not accept the boundary, neither side truly wanted to fight over Oregon, and a compromise was reached. In June 1846, shortly after war began with Mexico, the Senate approved a treaty that gave the United States sole ownership of the Oregon country—with the northern boundary farther south, at 49 degrees. Polk reluctantly agreed to the compromise.

The War with Mexico

To resolve the troubles with Mexico, Polk pursued a two-pronged policy. He sent **John Slidell** to negotiate an agreement to resolve the Texas annexation and boundary problem. Slidell also hoped to buy California for \$20–25 million. At the same time, the president ordered General **Zachary Taylor** and 3,500 American troops to the disputed border area. When Slidell's mission failed, Taylor moved his troops from the Nueces River, which Mexico claimed as the border, south to the Rio Grande river. Mexico viewed this as an aggressive act, and in April 1846, Mexican and American troops clashed. On May 13, 1846, Congress declared war on Mexico.

Over the next two years, Zachary Taylor and **Winfield Scott** led American troops to victory after victory against the poorly prepared Mexican army. By 1848, most of Mexico was under American control. In addition, Stephen Kearny successfully seized parts of California and established American claims to the region. Although the war was a military success, the conflict gave Polk and the Democrats political headaches. Military successes promoted the presidential aspirations of Taylor and Scott, both of whom were Whigs. Also, by 1848, the Whigs were raising charges that Polk had deliberately maneuvered the country into war by provoking the border incident in the spring of 1846.

Under mounting political pressure, Polk accepted the **Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo** in 1848, which finally resolved the issue of Texas and gave the United States control of the **Mexican Cession**. It did not, however, quell the political turmoil. Instead, the new territories proved to be a “dose of poison” for American unity. Polk's opponents charged him with provoking the war to satisfy a “**slave power**” in the South. During the war, Polk's political enemies introduced the **Wilmot Proviso**, which attempted to block the spread of slavery into any new lands that might be acquired from the war. Although never approved, the proviso roiled congressional debate for the next several years.

The Compromise of 1850

The immediate crisis generated by the war was California's statehood bid in 1849. The South opposed the admission of another free state and feared the exclusion of slavery from all of the Mexican Cession. Henry Clay, sensing an opportunity to settle several sectional issues around the admission of California, proposed the **Compromise of 1850**. This four-part legislative package included California statehood, an end to the slave trade in the District of Columbia, a stronger fugitive slave law, and **popular sovereignty** for the remaining territories of the Mexican Cession. When Clay was unable to get congressional approval for the compromise, **Stephen Douglas** stepped in and drove the compromise through Congress as four separate bills. While the compromise postponed sectional conflict, it seemed an “artful evasion” to many observers. It restored an uneasy peace but provided no guidelines for settling future disputes over slavery in the territories.

Slavery and Politics

The debate over slavery's spread also divided the political parties. The Democrats split between those who saw slaveholding as a constitutional right that should expand without restriction and the supporters of popular sovereignty, who wanted the decision about slavery left in the hands of the voters in the specific territories. The Whigs, already weakened by internal divisions, could not find a middle ground on slavery and disappeared after the election of 1852. Third parties such as the **Free Soil Party** and the **Know-Nothing Party** tried to fill the void, but neither caught on with the electorate.

When Stephen Douglas introduced the **Kansas-Nebraska Bill** in 1854, the nation's fragile political alignment collapsed. Douglas's bill divided the Nebraska territory into two territories and called for a vote among the settlers to decide the future of slavery there. This de facto repeal of the Missouri Compromise created a firestorm of protest and within months of its passage, the **Republican Party** formed, dedicated to combating the growing influence of the “slave power.”

HIGHLIGHTS

of the Period



- ★ **Alamo** — mission and fort that was the site of a siege and battle during the Texas Revolution, which resulted in the massacre of all its defenders; the event helped galvanize the Texas rebels and eventually led to their victory at the Battle of San Jacinto and independence from Mexico.
- ★ **Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna** — political opportunist and general who served as president of Mexico eleven different times and commanded the Mexican army during the Texas Revolution in the 1830s and the war with the United States in the 1840s.
- ★ **Compromise of 1850** — proposal by Henry Clay to settle the debate over slavery in territories gained from the Mexican War; it was shepherded through Congress by Stephen Douglas. Its elements included admitting California as a free state, ending the buying and selling of slaves in the District of Columbia (DC), a more stringent Fugitive Slave Law, postponed decisions about slavery in the New Mexico and Utah Territories, and settlement of the Texas-New Mexico boundary and debt issues.
- ★ **Franklin Pierce** — northern Democratic president with southern principles, 1853–1857, who signed the Kansas-Nebraska Act and sought sectional harmony above all else.
- ★ **Free Soil Party** — formed from the remnants of the Liberty Party in 1848; adopting a slogan of “free soil, free speech, free labor, and free men,” it opposed the spread of slavery into territories and supported homesteads, cheap postage, and internal improvements. It ran Martin Van Buren (1848) and John Hale (1852) for president and was absorbed into the Republican Party by 1856.
- ★ **Gadsden Purchase (1853)** — U.S. acquisition of land south of the Gila River from Mexico for \$10 million; the land was needed for a possible transcontinental railroad line through the southern United States. However, the route was never used.
- ★ **James K. Polk** — Democratic president from 1845 to 1849; nicknamed “Young Hickory” because of his close political and personal ties to Andrew Jackson, he pursued an aggressive foreign policy that led to the Mexican War, settlement of the Oregon issue, and the acquisition of the Mexican Cession.
- ★ **John L. O’Sullivan** — influential editor of the *Democratic Review* who coined the phrase “manifest destiny” in 1845.
- ★ **Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854)** — Stephen Douglas’s bill to open western territories, promote a transcontinental railroad, and boost his presidential ambitions; it divided the Nebraska territory into two territories and used popular sovereignty to decide slavery in the region. Among Douglas’s goals in making this proposal was to populate Kansas in order to make more attractive a proposed route for a transcontinental railroad that ended in Chicago, in his home state of Illinois.

HIGHLIGHTS

of the Period

- ★ **Know-Nothing Party** — influential third party of the 1840s; it opposed immigrants, especially Catholics, and supported temperance, a waiting period for citizenship, and literacy tests. Officially the American Party, its more commonly used nickname came from its members' secrecy and refusal to tell strangers anything about the group. When questioned, they would only reply, "I know nothing."
- ★ **Lewis Cass** — Democratic senator who proposed popular sovereignty to settle the slavery question in the territories; he lost the presidential election in 1848 against Zachary Taylor but continued to advocate his solution to the slavery issue throughout the 1850s.
- ★ **Manifest Destiny** — set of ideas used to justify American expansion in the 1840s; weaving together the rhetoric of economic necessity, racial superiority, and national security, the concept implied an inevitability of U.S. continental expansion.
- ★ **Mexican Cession** — region comprising California and all or parts of the states of the present-day American Southwest that Mexico turned over to the United States after the Mexican War.
- ★ **Nashville Convention** — meeting of representatives of nine southern states in the summer of 1850 to monitor the negotiations over the Compromise of 1850; it called for extension of the Missouri Compromise line to the Pacific Ocean and a stronger Fugitive Slave law. The convention accepted the Compromise but laid the groundwork for a southern confederacy in 1860–1861.
- ★ **Ostend Manifesto (1854)** — a statement by American envoys abroad to pressure Spain into selling Cuba to the United States; the declaration suggested that if Spain would not sell Cuba, the United States would be justified in seizing it. It was quickly repudiated by the U.S. government but it added to the belief that a "slave power" existed and was active in Washington.
- ★ **Popular sovereignty** — political process promoted by Lewis Cass, Stephen Douglas, and other northern Democrats whereby, when a territory organized, its residents would vote to decide the future of slavery there; the idea of empowering voters to decide important questions was not new to the 1840s and 1850s or to the slavery issue, however.
- ★ **Republican Party** — political party formed in 1854 in response to the Kansas-Nebraska Act; it combined remnants of Whig, Free Soil, and Know-Nothing Parties as well as disgruntled Democrats. Although not abolitionist, it sought to block the spread of slavery in the territories. It also favored tariffs, homesteads, and a transcontinental railroad.
- ★ **Sam Houston** — leader of the Texas revolutionaries, 1835–1836, first president of the Republic of Texas, and later a U.S. Senator from the state of Texas; he was a close political and personal ally of Andrew Jackson.



HIGHLIGHTS

of the Period



- ★ **"slave power"** — the belief that a slave-holding oligarchy existed to maintain slavery in the South and to spread it throughout the United States, including into the free states; this belief held that a southern cabal championed a closed, aristocratic way of life that attacked northern capitalism and liberty.
- ★ **Stephen Austin** — leader of American immigration to Texas in the 1820s; he negotiated land grants with Mexico and tried to moderate growing Texan rebelliousness in the 1830s. After Texas became an independent nation, he served as its secretary of state.
- ★ **Stephen Douglas** — a leading Democratic senator in the 1850s; nicknamed the "Little Giant" for his small size and great political power, he steered the Compromise of 1850 and the Kansas-Nebraska Act through Congress. Although increasingly alienated from the southern wing of his party, he ran against his political rival Abraham Lincoln for president in 1860 and lost.
- ★ **Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848)** — agreement that ended the Mexican War; under its terms Mexico gave up all claims to Texas north of the Rio Grande and ceded California and the Utah and New Mexico territories to the United States. The United States paid Mexico fifteen million dollars for the land, but the land cession amounted to nearly half that nation's territory.
- ★ **Wilmot Proviso** — measure introduced in Congress in 1846 to prohibit slavery in all territory that might be gained by the Mexican War; southerners blocked its passage in the Senate. Afterward, it became the congressional rallying platform for the antislavery forces in the late 1840s and early 1850s.
- ★ **Winfield Scott** — arguably the finest military figure in America from the War of 1812 to the Civil War; he distinguished himself in the Mexican War, ran unsuccessfully for president (1852), and briefly commanded the Union armies at the beginning of the Civil War.
- ★ **Zachary Taylor** — military hero of Mexican War and the last Whig elected president (1848); his sudden death in July 1850 allowed supporters of the Compromise of 1850 to get the measures through Congress.

Ideas to Ponder

After reviewing the chapter's summary, highlights, and your primary text, discuss the following with members of your study group.

- 1 How did the ideas of Manifest Destiny dominate the presidential election of 1844?
- 2 How did U.S. miscalculations over Oregon almost cause war with Great Britain in 1846?
- 3 How did the Texas Revolution lead to the Mexican War?
- 4 How did President Polk use "the carrot and the stick" approach towards Mexico to settle the disputes over Texas in 1846?
- 5 Why did many Americans believe that the United States caused the Mexican War, even though the Mexicans fired the first shots?
- 6 What political problems did President Polk face during the Mexican War?
- 7 Was the Wilmot Proviso the first political shot of the Civil War? Explain.
- 8 Why did the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo fail to satisfy either the Democratic president or the Whig Congress?
- 9 Why was the Compromise of 1850 only a short-term solution to the sectional conflicts of the 1850s?
- 10 How did the belief in a "slave power" influence political developments in the 1850s?
- 11 How did implementing popular sovereignty prove more difficult than its supporters anticipated?
- 12 How was the land acquired from Mexico "a dose of poison" to American unity?
- 13 How did the Kansas-Nebraska Act change the political landscape in the mid 1850s?
- 14 How did the Ostend Manifesto reinforce the belief in a "slave power"?
- 15 How did the formation of the Republican Party provide a political home for disgruntled groups and philosophies in the mid 1850s?